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ABSTRACT

A review of the status of English language instruction in Uganda provides an overview of the role of English in society in general, and outlines the status of English use and instruction in the educational system at all levels (preprimary, elementary, secondary, higher, vocational, adult, and teacher education). The review outlines the characteristics and training of English language instructors, the type and availability of instructional materials, educational administration and planning in relation to English teaching, British and other international support, commercial opportunities related to English instruction, creative writing, and other sources of information. It is concluded that the current political situation makes the language teaching situation unsettled and confused. The major strength is the wide use and prestige of English; the main weakness is the lack of teaching materials and resources to adapt language teaching to emerging circumstances. (MSE)

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ENGLISH TEACHING PROFILE

Country: Uganda

Date: April 1986

1. ROLE AND STATUS OF ENGLISH

English and Swahili are the official languages in Uganda. English is used for almost all official purposes, except in the army and the police. It is also important in business. English is the means of communication between educated Ugandans of different native languages. It is one of the main vehicles for news, both printed and on radio or television. Its status derives mostly from its being the language of law, government and education; practically all education is English medium.

As no native language has any wide currency outside its tribal area, and as Swahili is not so highly regarded, English is to some extent a national language. Little is written in most native languages and literature in English is therefore important.

2. ENGLISH WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

School

English is the medium of instruction in secondary and higher education, and in the upper classes of all primary schools. Most town primary schools teach in English from the first year, and many pupils have used English at nursery school. Rural schools generally change to English medium at primary three or four, although many teachers rely on first language instruction after that.

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English is taken as a subject by all pupils from primary one to secondary four. After O-level, pupils may choose English literature as an A-level course; all will do some language in their general paper.

Except in some Baganda schools, English is the first, and usually the only, language pupils learn to read and write. A pass in English at O-level is essential for many purposes - to enter a teacher training college, for example. It is no longer necessary for entrance to the higher secondary classes.

Higher education

There are courses at Makerere University in language and literature - in effect English language and English literature. A native-like competence is assumed for university courses and there is no provision for language development or English for special purposes (ESP).

English is also a subject at the national teachers colleges; there, and at the Uganda Technical College, all students have some language work in liberal/ development studies.

Syllabus and textbooks

All schools officially follow a Ministry of Education syllabus but as it is out of date, and as there is such a shortage of textbooks (four to a class of fifty is common) teachers improvise as best they can to teach towards the final examination.

Primary classes start with an old 'Oxford English' course; primary five, six and seven use the specially written 'Nile' course. The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), with help from Longmans, has started work on revising the primary one course. The book most secondary teachers use for language is Practical English, supplemented by whatever else is available. A new Integrated English Syllabus for classes S1 to S4 has been drawn up by the NCDC but this is not yet generally implemented.

The final primary examination in English is mainly multiple-choice, with a little picture composition. O- and A-level exams are similar in style to O- and A-levels in England.

Teacher-training

Qualified Ugandan teachers of English in secondary schools are either:

university graduates in language and literature with a BEd (usually taken concurrently)

holders of the University Diploma in Education, gained after two years (post A-level) at the national teachers colleges, where they take English with another teaching subject.

Primary teachers may have taken English in their two-year post O-level training college course; older teachers may have only had a training course up to approximately O-level standard.

3. TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

There is a shortage of teachers throughout the education system, particularly teachers of English. To alleviate the supply of teachers for the lower forms of secondary school, the old national teachers college has been replaced by nine new national teachers colleges. The intake of students specializing in English increased about four-fold to approximately 300 in 1984. There are plans to introduce a new qualification for English teachers whereby they will specialize in English alone instead of English with another subject.

Many of the problems in teacher supply and training can be traced back to the exodus of expatriate teachers in the 1970s. There might be scope for British participation again when the situation allows. There could be input to the primary sector through the teacher training colleges; to secondary by supplying teachers through training; and to tertiary with help with English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology. Participation might also be possible in in-service training: courses exist in the National Institute of Education and other centres for upgrading teachers; there are other in-service facilities but these are little used at present.

4. MATERIALS SUPPORT

There is a severe shortage of all ELT materials, particularly in schools. Only a few well-established schools have enough books to use as the basis of courses and for reading practice - and what books there are will generally be out of date and in very bad condition.

An IDA (World Bank) programme supplies some school textbooks; and the British Council Book Presentation Programme includes ELT books for senior secondary classes and for teacher training. These will relieve some of the current shortage but cannot cope with the expansion of the school population.

There has also been some British Council support for public libraries, but only a few students have access to them. Very little is available from bookshops, and very few students can afford what there is. The book supply system does exist (Longman has a local office) but cannot function without foreign exchange.

Some of the new books supplied are reprints of the old course-books but there are some copies of newer and more appropriate books such as English in Use (Longman) and supplementary reading material. Supporting materials are not generally used or available.

5. EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN RELATION TO ENGLISH TEACHING

The Ministry of Education is generally responsible for schools in Uganda, but many are private or semi-private; administrative difficulties and local circumstances make most schools autonomous anyway. The Ministry is responsible for training colleges, while the university supervises the academic side of teaching qualifications. The administrative structure of the National Teachers Colleges is at present confused. In the Ministry, Chief Education Officers for Primary, Secondary and Training report to the Permanent Secretary, while professional aspects of teaching are supervised by the

inspectorate under the Chief Inspector. There is an English section of the Central Inspectorate, and inspectors of English have specific responsibilities such as primary, secondary, teacher-training and drama. There are also area inspectors, including inspectors of English, based at local education offices.

6. DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Education in Uganda began in mission schools, and their traditions are still significant for ELT today. Schooling is based on a traditional English curriculum; much of it is in boarding schools, often in out-of-the-way places. The population of these schools, particularly at senior levels, may not be drawn from any one tribe, so that English is used as a lingua franca in the playground as well as in the classroom. In some schools, pupils are punished for speaking their first language. On the other hand, this school English may be far from an internationally acceptable model.

The education system is pyramidic, with students proceeding to each higher and more select level if they pass their exams and can afford the fees. There is a large primary intake, of which only a small proportion will go on to secondary; there is even more stringent academic and financial selection to go on to A-levels.

Tertiary education is free and students at this level get financial help: there is fierce competition for places. In recent years there has been great pressure to expand the secondary sector, and many new schools have opened. These generally have even fewer resources in accommodation, staff and materials than the established schools.

There have been movements in the past to encourage local languages as school subjects and as media of instruction in primary schools. It has been difficult, with the multiplicity of languages and dialects, and only a few local languages were ever recognized for school use. Policy settled on primary four as the normal stage to move from local language medium to English, except where the nature of the school required it to be English medium from primary one. Now, however, the pressure is to start English for instruction as early as possible. This is due to the recognition of the importance of English and worry at the decline of standards in English following the departure of most native-speaking teachers - a decline due to shortage of teachers and lack of exposure to the language rather than to the quality of the remaining Ugandan teachers. As a result, more and more primary classes are supposedly English medium while teachers competent to teach them in English are not available.

The Ugandan education system, therefore, typically produces students who have basic communicative skills in English (acquired mainly through studying in English) and the more formal skills required to pass examinations (but these may be of the multiple-choice type). However, there are great weaknesses in all other aspects of the language skills. The situation could be helped by the implementation of the Integrated English Syllabus drawn up by the National Curriculum Development Centre.

7. ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

None.

8. BRITISH SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

There are one KELT and three VSO volunteers at the national teachers colleges and there remains a handful of British teachers at secondary schools. A few British Council scholarships are available for ELT teacher-training etc. Most of the materials used (see Section 4) are of British origin, principally from Longman, Oxford University Press and Heinemann.

9. AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

None.

10. OTHER AGENCY SUPPORT

None.

11. COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

There would be great opportunities for the sale of materials (principally books but also cassettes and other supplementary materials) and for the provision of some ELT services, if the finance and foreign exchange were available.

12. CREATIVE WRITING

There is a very active tradition of writing in English, with high standards in poetry, prose and drama. Only a limited amount is now available because of the difficulty and expense of publication. There are also several English newspapers and magazines.

13. CURRENT RESEARCH

None.

14. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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15. GENERAL STATEMENT

At the time of writing, in the aftermath of the 1985 military coup, the situation in Uganda is unsettled and confused, and it has been impossible to provide information on some of the topics above, or to give current statistics. Moreover, the future of the education system and the aid programmes is uncertain. However, the main strengths and weaknesses of the current position of English teaching in the country are likely to remain.

These strengths are the prestige and wide use of English, the recognition that a good command of English is necessary to get on, and the excellence of the English of the older educated Ugandan. The main weaknesses come from the lack of teaching materials and of resources to adapt language teaching to the different circumstances facing the present generation.